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TAGS: PHUM SOCI IR TH IRAQ

SUBJECT: THAILAND: NOBEL LAUREATE SHIRIN EBADI DISCUSSES
HER VIEWS ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN IRAN, SHARES OPINIONS
ON THE THAI SOUTH AND IRAQ

1. (U) SUMMARY. On April 10, Iranian Nobel Peace Laureate (2003) Shirin Ebadi spoke in Bangkok. She focused a discussion attended by poloff on her experiences as a judge, lawyer and advocate for women,s rights in Iran, before and after the Islamic Revolution. She argued that many of the laws that stand in the way of women,s equality in Iran are in place due to "the wrong interpretation of Islam," and that these laws are opposed by a "very strong" women,s movement. Ms. Ebadi also criticized the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and stated that the U.S. reason for going to war was a desire for Iraqi oil. At a dinner reception that night, Ms. Ebadi called for a withdrawal of Thai troops from the South as a means of beginning peaceful negotiations with "the rebels." END SUMMARY

"THE RIGHTS OF HUMAN BEINGS ARE THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN"

2. (U) On April 10, Iranian Nobel Peace Laureate (2003) Shirin Ebadi -- who has just been named one of Time Magazine,s 100 Most Influential People -- spoke about "Defending the Rights of Women and Children" to a small audience composed primarily of representatives of the NGO community and several members of the Thai Human Rights Commission (HRC). Poloff observed several Muslim attendees in the audience.

3. (U) Ms. Ebadi contrasted different ways women suffer inequality in the West and in the Islamic World. In the West, she said, women,s rights are legally protected, but not always recognized by society. In the Islamic world, women suffer "legal and institutionalized" discrimination, including polygamy and unequal treatment under the law. She concluded that these two halves form "an entire world where women are second-class citizens" stemming principally from a universal "patriarchal culture." Ms. Ebadi argued that the key to a peaceful society is a combination of "real" democracy and human rights. She repeatedly emphasized that a democracy elected by the majority, but which does not respect the rights of its women and minorities is not a "real" democracy.

4. (U) When asked why so many educated women in Iran supported ("voted") for the Revolution in 1979, Ebadi responded that the key ideals behind the 1979 Revolution were "independence and freedom," which she supported to this day. She expressed her hope that someday there would be "real" democracy and freedom in Iran.

5. (U) Ms. Ebadi was asked what women,s groups in Iran have been able to accomplish under Islamic shariyah law. She noted that 63% of Iranian university students are now women and that Iranian women are becoming more educated than men. The feminist movement in Iran has been "gaining ground strongly" and there is support from all classes of society. Still, she said, the Iranian legal system continues to deny women their rights as equal citizens. She pointed out that many of the current laws derived from "the wrong interpretation" of Islam and that these laws were "not compatible with Iranian culture."

6. (U) She proudly stated that pressure from women,s groups had been instrumental in changing many laws, including the reversal of a 1979 ruling that women could no longer serve as judges. In 1979, female judges (including Ms. Ebadi herself) were demoted to clerks in their own courts. Thanks to women "fighting the system" she said, the government ruled in 1992 that the previous interpretation of Islam had been incorrect. Although the women,s movement still had a long way to go, she expressed optimism that women would one day win equal rights in Iran

IRAQ

7. (U) When asked about Iraq, Ms. Ebadi stated that she had denounced the U.S.-led military attack on Iraq on many occasions. She added that although Saddam Hussein had been a terrible dictator who "should have been eliminated," she "wished" that he had been overthrown by Iraqis and not by U.S. military force. She said that recent elections were "a step in the right direction," but was adamant that the price of the war had been "outrageously high," resulting in 100,000 Iraqi deaths, the looting of national museums and the

destruction of homes. She argued that the human cost could have been lessened greatly if the international community had helped Iraqis to do the job themselves.

18. (U) She stated matter-of-factly that "oil was the deciding factor for going to war." When asked if she believed the war was fought for the benefit of Israel, she considered the question a moment before responding that while "it goes without saying" that the foremost U.S. objective in the Middle East is Israeli security, Iraq had not posed a serious threat to Israel since the first Gulf War. In her opinion, it was clearly oil that interested the U.S.

THE THAI SOUTH

19. (U) At a dinner hosted by the Thai Senate Foreign Relations Committee the evening of April 10, press reports indicate Ms. Ebadi urged a full pullout of Thai troops from the South as a means of entering into peaceful talks with the "rebels." "In my opinion, soldiers must be returned to their barrack. Through (dialogue) everything must be solved," she is quoted as saying. As part of Ms. Ebadi's message of the importance of "real democracy," she also commented that "majority-Islam nations must observe the rights of minorities such as Christians, while majority-Buddhist nations must observe the rights of minority Muslims."

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